



IMPACTS OF THE SOCIO-CULTURAL BELIEFS AND HYGIENIC PRACTICES DURING MENSTRUATION AMONGST THE ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN SINGARBILL GRAM PANCHAYAT, TRIPURA

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation is a normal biological process like pregnancy. But even in today's modern world, many communities seem to view it as a matter of shame and disgust. This very natural process turns out to be a significant challenge for many girls, especially the ones belonging to low socio-economic households. These communities often lack awareness and have limited access to sanitary products. India is a leading country in period poverty and the deep-rooted cultural stigma adds to its growth.

In that context, this study is conducted to highlight the awareness, practices and challenges during menstruation amongst the adolescent girls of Singarbill Gram Panchayat, West Tripura. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches have been utilised for a comprehensive understanding of the subject. A sample of 60 girls have been studied, all of them belonging to low socio-economic households. And data has been collected using an in depth interview method.

Menstrual practices not only affect one's self esteem, but also directly affects education. Thousands of girls drop out of school once they start menstruating, either due to lack of proper sanitation or due to shame and stigma. This study emphasises on the need of awareness programs on the hygienic practices and on breaking the age old taboos and restrictions on menstruators. This research focuses on contributing to a better understanding of period poverty from the grassroot level and highlights its impact on identity buildup amongst the girls. It advocates for the need of policy changes, community initiatives and education to ensure healthy menstruation and dignity for all.

KEYWORDS: Menstruation, Period Poverty, Menstrual hygiene, Sanitation, Taboo, Stigma

INTRODUCTION

As kids we all feel like growing up being like the elders of our families. But little do we know what it actually takes to reach that stage. An individual undergoes many transformations on the way to become an adult. Those transformations include adolescence and puberty. The term Adolescence comes from the latin word 'Adolescere' which literally means 'to grow up'. It is the time period in which several changes occur in an individual's body. During this time period, a person experiences not only physical but also mental, emotional and psychological changes within themselves. Puberty refers to the process of changes or the bodily changes to be precise that occurs in one's body during adolescence. Adolescence is more like a journey to adulthood. The most important characteristic of adulthood is the reproductive maturity where the bodies of male and female individuals become capable of reproduction. In females, reproductive maturity is attained completely when she has her menarche. This process is commonly known as Menstruation and the people who experience it are known as Menstruators. In India, menstruation is considered to be a taboo. This very natural process of life cycle is referred to as "unclean" or "embarrassing". The menstruators are usually considered to be "impure". This myth has a lot of implications in the lives of the menstruators. The stigma in itself causes insecurities and low self esteem among the menstruators. There is a significant percentage drop in school attendance among the adolescent menstruators. This is because of the shortage of resources that

one needs during periods. Almost a quarter of menstruators in India stop stepping out of their houses during this time of the month because of their inability to afford sanitary products.

India is a country that is leading in case of Period poverty. Period poverty refers to the struggle that menstruators from low economic households face while accessing period products. This eventually leads them to substitute sanitary pads with cloths and rags, sometimes even paper and ash, which are few main causes of the deadly diseases among menstruators. By the time they are taught about menstrual hygiene in schools, their economic situation forces them to drop out from school. A study by A. Vashisht et al. (2018) highlights this issue, revealing that 40% of adolescent girls surveyed were absent from school during menstruation. Menstrual hygiene is an essential part. If one doesn't take precautions and maintain hygiene then it can lead to several infectious diseases such as Urinary tract infection, Reproductive tract infection, Cervical cancer, Toxic shock syndrome etc.

This research focuses to study the hygienic practices and problems faced by menstruators among the Adolescent Girls of a village in Tripura. The area under study is Singarbill Gram Panchayat which is located in the West Tripura District of Tripura. This region consists of people from various socio-economic backgrounds but this research focuses only on that particular area within this region where the people belong to

low socio-economic households. The people living in this area mostly earn their living by farming, driving, working as house helpers, being daily wage labourers and through other low income jobs. Most of these families have only one earning member. In such an economic condition where affording proper meals timely becomes difficult, accessing period hygienic products every month is nearly impossible.

It's not a hidden fact that India is one of the top most countries struggling with period poverty. According to the World Bank, period poverty impacts approximately 500 million women and girls globally. In India alone, 23 million girls drop out of school annually after reaching menarche due to a lack of resources and facilities (Source: NDTV). Every 1 in 4 girls misses school during menstruation, underscoring the urgent need for intervention. The cultural stereotypes, myths and taboos that are associated with menstruation add more to the lives of people struggling with period poverty. The psychosocial impact of menstruation in India has shown to be deleterious to the development of women. Therefore this research project focuses on the level of awareness, problems and practices on menstruation in the area of Singarbill gram panchayat and their ability to access sanitary products. It is a psychosocial perspective analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While conducting this study, various books, journal articles and websites have been referred to. Among them a few has been mentioned as follows :

- A Dasgupta and M Sarkar in their article **“Menstrual Hygiene : How hygienic is the Adolescent Girl?”** analysed the status of menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls from a school located in Singur, West Bengal. The study revealed that almost half of the girls involved in the study were ignorant about maintaining Menstrual hygiene.
- Baishakhi Paria, Agnihotri Bhattacharyya and Sukes Das in their article, **“A comparative study on Menstrual Hygiene among Urban and Rural adolescent girls of West Bengal”** tried to compare the different perspectives on menstrual hygiene and practices between the rural and urban area. They found that the practice of menstrual hygiene among urban area menstruators are much more satisfactory than the rural areas which they reasoned is due to lack of awareness and education among the rural areas.
- Sangeeta Kanal, Sweta Singh and Alok Kumar in their article **“Menstrual Hygiene Practices in Context of Schooling: A community study among the Rural Adolescent Girls in Varanasi”** revealed that almost 75% of the menstruators did not follow any hygienic practices. The material used by them is of a major concern as if it is not cleaned properly then it could be a reason for deadly infection.

OBJECTIVES

The aims and objectives of this research project are:

- To find out the level of awareness among the menstruators regarding menstrual hygiene

- To find out the problems faced by menstruators while menstruating
- To explore practices and find out prevailing taboos and beliefs around menstruation
- To detect the level of period poverty in Singarbill Gram Panchayat

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objectives of this study, a descriptive and analytical approach was adopted. The findings of the study combine both qualitative and quantitative data for a comprehensive understanding of the subject. The sample consists of 60 adolescent girls between the age of 10 to 20 years belonging to a low socio-economic household. The sample was selected using snowball sampling method, a type of non-probability sampling.

The data was collected from primary sources through in depth interviews by utilizing a set of unstructured open-ended questions. Both primary and secondary data were crucial for this study. Primary data was utilised for analyzing the contemporary impact of menstruation and secondary literature was referred to explore the historical and cultural perspectives on menstruation.

The study does not aim to generalize its findings to a broader population. Rather, it seeks to develop an analytical understanding of the problem and its underlying causes, therefore, providing a nuanced perspective on the issue.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study was conducted among 20 adolescent menstruators in a low socio-economic community of Singarbill Gram Panchayat. The respondents were chosen by the Simple Random selection method. The age of the respondents lies between 11 to 20 years old. When divided by age group, it is seen that 65% of the respondents fall between 11 to 15 years of age and the rest 35% belong to 16 to 20 years of age.

Out of all the menstruators under study, only 60% of them are presently school going. 25% of them left education after their secondary schooling and 15% of them had dropped out of school after their primary schooling.

60% of the respondents belong to a family with only their father as an earning member. 30% of them have both their father and mother as earning members and the rest 10% are themselves the earning member of the family. All the respondents belong to families where the source of earning is small local businesses, working as home helpers, daily wage labourers, cleaners, drivers etc.

In the study it was found that 25% of the respondents had their menarche at the age of 12. 40% had their menarche at the age of 13. 15% at the age of 11 and the rest 20% had attained it at 14 years of age. Maximum of menstruators usually have regular menses (80%). Only 20% were found to have irregular menstrual cycles. 65% of the respondents face moderate blood flow during their menses whereas about 25% mostly has moderate flow but at times does go through heavy bleeding.

10% are found to have heavy and prolonged bleeding every month which can also be called Menorrhagia. Out of all the respondents only 30% are found to have dysmenorrhea. When asked about experiencing Premenstrual Syndrome, none of the respondents had much to say as they never noticed anything as such within them. 40% of the menstruators undergo body ache and back pain prior to their menses.

80% of the respondents had no idea about menstruation before their menarche. These respondents have learnt about menstruation from their mother after attaining menarche. Initially, about 25% of them thought that they have a disease after spotting blood for the first time. Only 20% had little knowledge about it. These 20% had learned about menstruation from their friends who had attained menarche prior to them.

It is depicted from the study that none of the menstruators uses sanitary pads regularly. 70% of the menstruators use both cloth pieces and sanitary pads. And the rest 30% uses only cloth pieces as according to them, affording sanitary pads every month is nearly impossible in their financial state. When enquired about the interval of changing sanitary pads, it is observed that 71% of them change it after 8 to 10 hours if they have moderate flow. The cloth pieces are reused regularly by the respondents. The sanitary pads used by the respondents are of low cost. 25% of the respondents have a minimum idea on the infection that can be caused due to unsatisfactory hygienic maintenance. The rest 75% were ignorant about menstrual hygiene.

Only 35% of the respondents knew a bit about Sustainable Sanitary Products. When the rest 65% were told about tampons and menstrual cups, they were amazed to hear about the existence of such products. All though when all the respondents were asked about usage of tampons and menstrual cups, they immediately denied as 80% are fearful about it and according to the rest 20%, inserting something like tampon and menstrual cups through the vaginal canal would take away their virginity.

It has been observed that few of the respondents (30%) thought that the urinal passage and the vaginal passage in women are one. Almost 80% of them believed that menstruation is a biological process but among them only 25% knew the actual cause of menstruation. The rest of the 75% barely knew anything about the menstrual process.

100% of the respondents were restricted to visit temples during their menses. 70% of them avoided eating pickles, lemon and other kinds of sour food. 55% of them were not allowed to enter the kitchen or touch anything before they take bath everyday during their menses. 100% of the respondents are taught at their homes that menstruation is something to be ashamed of and is not appropriate to be discussed publicly. Additionally, 20% of them stated that menstruation is a curse to womanhood.

KEY FINDINGS

After proper analysis of the entire data produced during this research, the following opinions has been drawn:

1. The level of awareness regarding menstruation and menstrual hygiene is found to be extremely low among

the respondents. The process and facts of menstruation are totally unclear to them.

2. Few physiological problems are faced by a moderate number of menstruators such as heavy bleeding, period cramps, bodyache etc. Experience of premenstrual syndrome is found to be nil.
3. Age-old restrictions and false beliefs such as not visiting temples during menses, considering menstruation as a curse, and avoiding speaking about menstruation in public are observed to prevail at an extreme level.
4. There is an utmost level of period poverty in the area under study. It is found that quite a number of menstruators use low cost sanitary pads only while stepping out during heavy flow and the rest of the menstruators use only old clothes.
5. The knowledge regarding sustainable menstruation among the respondents is almost zero.

CONCLUSION

Menstrual hygiene is an important indicator of one's health and personal development. Throughout the study it was discovered that maintenance of hygiene is unsatisfactory among the respondents. The main reason behind this is found to be lack of knowledge, the existing stigma around menstruation and period poverty. Hence, it is extremely pivotal to educate the menstruators on physiological facts, deconstruct the stigma and introduce cost-effective sustainable period products to them.

As we live in a patriarchal society or to be said, a male dominated society, it is crucial for the male members of the society to develop empathy for the menstruators. It is the need of the hour to enlighten the non-menstruators along with the menstruators with proper facts on menstrual hygiene. Knowledgeable parents or guardians play a vital role in their child's life. They are the first ones who passed their knowledge on menstruation to their children. Therefore, educating only the menstruators shall not bring fruitful results. It is important for the parents to have a proper and correct understanding of menstruation before they pass it on to their young ones.

When the entire society shall be familiar with the facts of menstruation, the fallacious beliefs, years old restrictions, customary perceptions, long-established norms and the incorrect attitude towards menstruators can be successfully abolished. The day when every person will start treating menstruation as normally as they treat pregnancy and stop hushing their voices on it, the level of period poverty will lower down to a greater extent and the fight against the stigma shall end.

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